New York Animation: Felix the Cash Cow

Subtlety doesn't seem to have been Pat Sullivan's strong suit. When attempting to impress Adolph Zukor with how badly he needed to retain the rights to Felix the Cat, Sullivan reportedly urinated on the man's desk. Raised in a working class neighborhood of Sydney, Australia, Patrick O'Sullivan made his way to England as a young man. He often slept on the banks of the Thames River, earning what he could by selling sketches, and the occasional published cartoon. Pat dropped the O' from his last name to do a bit of singing and hoofing in London dance halls, then tried his hand at being a film exhibitor, When that failed, Sullivan took a job tending mules being shipped across the Atlantic. On one voyage he jumped ship in the port of New York.

There were no animated cartoons yet when Pat Sullivan arrived in America, Winsor McCay having just started work on his Little Nemo masterpiece. Sullivan boxed for prize money until getting his art career on track. He landed a job assisting one of McClure's Magazine's artists on a cartoon strip. The suicide of that artist secured Sullivan a job handling the strip, leading him to Raoul Barré's Bronx animation studio in 1914.

When William Randolph Hearst raided Barré's staff in 1915 to form IFS he also invited Sullivan, who declined the offer. Barré soon fired Sullivan for incompetence, likely due to alcoholism. Sullivan opened his own studio. Pat Sullivan Productions made arrangements with producer Pat Powers, a founder of the Universal Motion Picture Manufacturing Company.

At that time Pat Powers held rights to make NERVY NAT HAS HIS FORTUNE TOLD, a live-action short based on James Montgomery Flagg's comic-strip. Flagg would be best remembered for his "Uncle Sam Wants You" recruitment poster in the upcoming war. Sullivan put together a cartoon film titled NERVY NAT written by Flagg for Powers to release. Powers arranged for Sullivan's artwork to be photographed at Universal's Fort Lee facility.

This is how Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer came to meet. Otto Messmer grew up in West Hoboken about five miles from Fort Lee. By age fourteen he'd started selling single panel cartoons to publications. Messmer saw Winsor McCay's first three animations, presented by McCay himself, on vaudeville stages. The kid wanted to make drawings move. Universal gave him the chance when Hy Mayer hired Otto Messmer as an assistant. But Mayer never put out any quantity, and that held Otto Messmer back. There

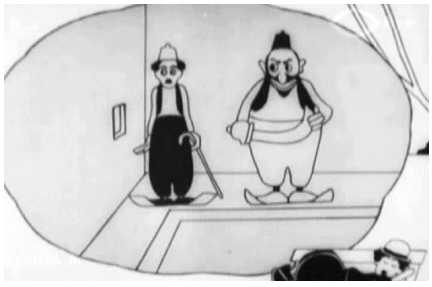
was a new art-form taking shape around him, and Messmer didn't plan on letting it pass him by.

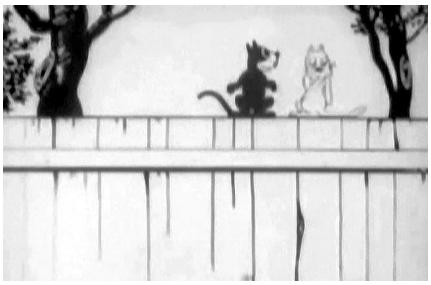
Otto Messmer took a job with Pat Sullivan, who sold Universal on a series about SAMMY JOHNSIN an "indolent colored boy". Pat Powers personally oversaw distribution through his Celebrity Pictures. The partnership didn't last long. One interesting film from Powers' and Sullivan's brief collaboration was THE TRIALS OF A MOVIE CARTOONIST where the highly creative Otto Messmer inter-mixed animation and live-action.

Pat Sullivan Productions worked out of an apartment near Bryant Park at 125 West 42nd Street, right across the street the Wurlitzer organ company. On that same block, a few doors over, Paul Terry rented space at 138 West 42nd Street where he tried to get his own animation career going.

Several artists jammed into Sullivan's apartment, He got himself arrested for statutory rape with a teenage girl from the neighborhood. Sullivan quickly married Marjorie Gallagher, one of his inkers, to prove he'd reformed. A good lawyer and a sympathetic judge led to a nine month prison sentence. During that time Otto Messmer was drafted and sent to the frontline trenches in France where he saw war close up.

Otto Messmer returned home to rejoin Pat Sullivan Productions in that same little apartment/studio near Bryant Park, just the two of them now. They did a series of Charlie Chaplin cartoons. The first one was patriotic, to mark America's recent victory against Germany: OVER THE RHINE WITH CHARLIE. Without permission they made eight Charlie cartoons, and soon had a deal with John Bray's Studio to distribute through Paramount Pictures.





In 1919 Sullivan and Messmer created a trilogy about a detective named HARDROCK DOME. John Bray released them. When Bray partnered up with Sam Goldwyn they became exclusive cartoon providers for Paramount. Sullivan seized that opportunity to sell Bray-Goldwyn cartoons for Paramount's screen magazine. One of those films was FELINE FOLLIES with a cat named Master Tom, who tested well.

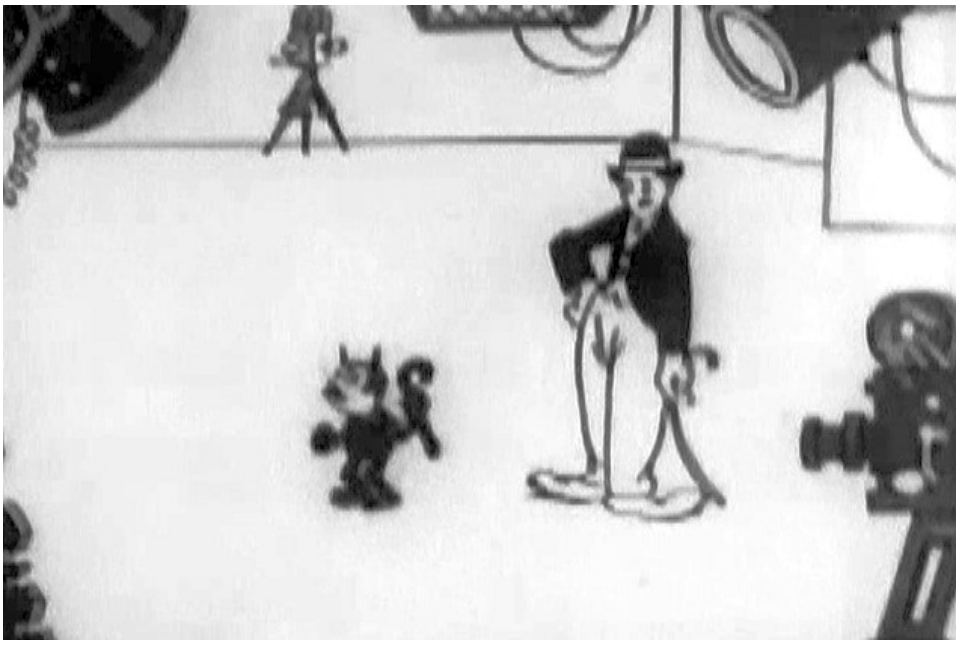
A Paramount executive renamed the cat "Felix" and ordered a series. Those cartoons alternated in Paramount reels with ones about gray SCAT THE CAT made by Frank Moser. Felix the Cat's character caught on like wild-fire. Prosperity got them out of that cramped apartment. In 1920 Pat Sullivan Productions moved to the fourth floor of the Lincoln Arcade Building on the corner of 66th Street, where Broadway crosses Columbus Avenue.

Marjorie Sullivan worked there alongside her husband, though he did little actual work. Pat's lawyer from the rape trial handled contracts and business details. Otto Messmer ran production. The studio did nothing except the FELIX THE CAT series. Pat Sullivan, having struck gold, stayed drunk and chased women. Attempting to exploit the success of Felix, John Bray cut a deal with William Randolph Hearst to revive KRAZY KAT. It didn't work. Felix had an inexplicable appeal. The fan-base for that little black cat spread worldwide.

When Paramount announced it planned to end its screen magazine, Sullivan feared he'd lose rights to the character of Felix. That's how he ended up pissing on Adolph Zukor's desk. Rather than deal with the lunatic, Zukor gave him the cat. Sullivan took Felix to Margaret J. Winkler, a cartoon distributor who'd been an assistant to one of the Warner brothers. The first effort for Winkler was FELIX SAVES THE DAY, done entirely by Otto Messmer. The film mixes live footage with animation so that Felix rides in a live-action taxi cab. Otto Messmer made good use of tight budgets.

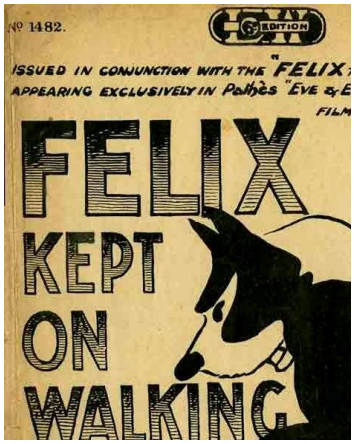
Hal Walker, who'd done some training with Raoul Barré in the Bronx, was hired as Messmer's assistant. Cels were rarely used at either Barré or Sullivan's studios unless an effect was needed. Barré had developed what he called the Slash System, by which finished drawings were done on paper that was cut to fit empty spaces against the background drawing. Beside the cost of cels being avoided, so was the expense of taking out a license with the Bray-Hurd Trust.

Sullivan merchandised the Felix image for dolls, postcards, and ceramic toys. Hearst's King Features Syndicate took advantage of the craze, licensing production of dolls of Krazy Kat. But John Bray's company ended their involvement with Hearst's cartoon series. There was no competing with Felix. Studying Charlie Chaplin for those earlier films influenced Otto Messmer immensely, adding nuance to Felix's personality. Felix could raise an eyebrow and get a laugh. *LIFE Magazine*'s respected film critic declared Felix the Cat to be among the top movie comedians of 1922. The cartoon FELIX IN HOLLYWOOD showed him hobnobbing with other stars, Chaplin among them.



Sullivan's studio put out a Felix the Cat newspaper strip drawn by Otto Messmer. The studio moved again, this time to a nice space at 47 West 63rd Street between Broadway and Central Park. It was a long narrow loft. A row of animation desks were built against one wall, and a partition set up for Sullivan's office along the other. A section in the back housed a camera.

Marjorie Sullivan was allowed to retire to a life of ease. All employees from there on would be men. The staff grew to about ten people. Otto Messmer kept the Felix assembly line running, over-seeing every aspect. He'd often be talking with one of the animators while simultaneously counting camera clicks from the other room to determine timing of a scene.



Messmer streamlined production. Drawings in a Felix cartoon were simple. Gray-tones were omitted for a stark black-on-white approach. Those who would be known as inkers in other studios were called tracers. They outlined drawings on a fresh page with ink. So much ink was used to fill in each Felix that opaquers were dubbed "blackeners". George Cannata, a short, feisty fellow from New Jersey was hired as a blackener in 1923. A song titled FELIX KEPT WALKING, sung by Clarkson Rose, became popular.

Stories in a Felix cartoon were rudimentary, often involving a quest of some sort, maybe for food or shelter, or even a bit of knowledge. Messmer favored plays on words. In one cartoon Felix helps a boy find out what makes the Moon shine and ends up drinking bootleg liquor, known as "moonshine". Ideas spewed forth from Messmer. No scripts were written. He'd pick a theme for a film and tell each animator the basics of the scene he wanted, and leave them to work. Notes were made in a drawings margin to let the cameraman know how many exposures were needed. Messmer would be everywhere at once while drawing his own scenes as well. In places a finished film's continuity seemed disjointed, but audiences didn't care. The character's popularity swelled. Pat Sullivan carried on in the press as if it was all his doing.

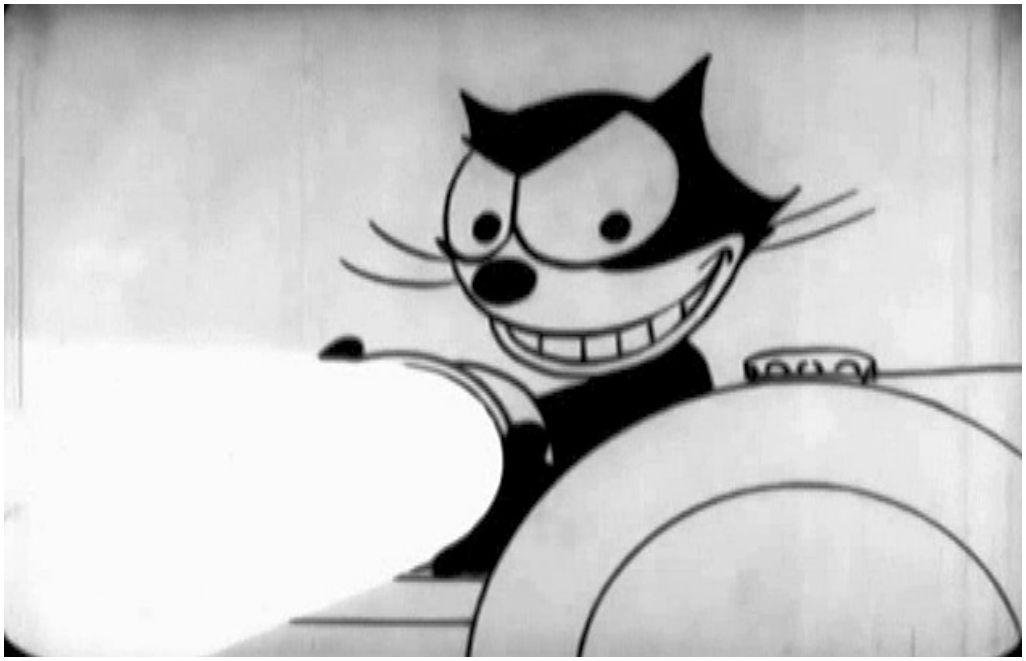
Trouble brewed between Sullivan and Margaret Winkler. He proved to be a quarrelsome drunkard, and she married a domineering booking agent named Charles Mintz who sought control of her business. Felix the Cat merchandise continued to sell. One of Margaret Winkler's other clients, a fellow named Disney, used a black cat character in

Mr. State Rights Buyer—Listen !
Pat Sullivan, my boss, has just made a contract with Miss Winkler to star me in a series of twelve cartoon comics. I am the only trained cat in the movies—and oh boy, can I act. For information about my new distributing arrangement, drop a line to
M. J. WINKLER
220 W. 42nd St. New York

his cartoons that looked a lot like Felix. Pat Sullivan picked a fight about that.

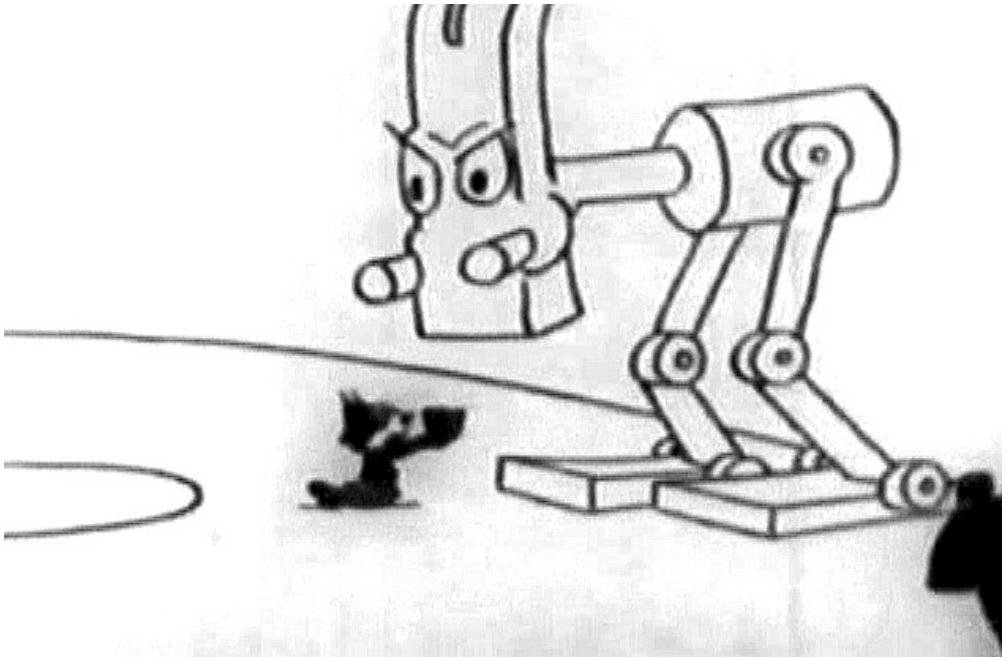
New York Globe cartoonist Jack Carr joined Sullivan's studio in 1924. So did Bill Nolan, who redesigned Felix to make him cuter. Production increased to twenty-one films a year. The continuity improved, and gray-tones appeared more often, giving the films some depth. Felix cartoons ranged in subject matter: that clever little cat might be on a golf course, hunting bear, or following his little blonde sidekick to school. Felix travelled by various creative means to Egypt, Japan, Russia, and even Story Book Land. One film was about evolution, another about union strikes. People loved it. Pat Sullivan and his wife went to England. The British press embraced Sullivan as a celebrity while he promoted his cartoons. Otto Messmer felt financially secure enough to marry his childhood sweetheart Anne Mason.

Pat Sullivan Productions and Margaret Winkler disputed their contract in court. Sullivan won the case and dismissed Winkler and Mintz as distributors in favor of Educational Pictures, who were affiliated with Fox Films. It was the Roaring Twenties, America's postwar hurrah. College students danced the Charleston. Regardless of Prohibition, bootleg liquor flowed everywhere. Middle-class Americans had never experienced such an age of leisure before. The automobile industry prospered as more people bought cars. Sullivan licensed out the use of Felix in THE CAT AND THE KIT, an advertisement cartoon for automobile headlights manufactured by Thomas Edison's company General Electric.



It's been written that on a good day Bill Nolan could do around five hundred pose drawings. Otto Messmer was nearly as quick. Felix films were completed at an astounding pace for such a small group. Suddenly Bill Nolan left Sullivan's studio to start his own in Long Branch, New Jersey with Margaret Winkler and Charles Mintz as producers. Nolan took Jack Carr with him. Nolan grabbed onto many elements of the Felix series for his KRAZY KAT revival. Sulivan brought Vernon Stallings in to replace Nolan.

About six years had passed since Charles Bowers drove Raoul Barré from the animation biz. Barré was hired by Pat Sullivan, who may have experienced some glee in having a man who once fired him under his thumb. Otto Messmer loved having Barré around. As production increased they needed more blackeners and sixteen year old Al Eugster was hired. During 1926 production increased to a cartoon every two weeks. Burt Gillett, another alumnus of Barré's studio, joined Messmer's crew.



Aviation was an advancing field. Airplanes became larger and faster. Their range increased. When Charles Lindbergh undertook his well publicized non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 Felix responded with NON-STOP FRIGHT, wherein the little cat flies across an ocean. A couple months later Ruth Elder set out to be the first woman to fly over the Atlantic. She brought a Felix doll along for good luck. *LIFE Magazine* ran an eight-panel cartoon exemplifying Felix as "the art of the motion picture". Then sound came into the movies in 1927. The days of a pianist sitting in a theater playing accompaniment to films were over, distributors wanted sound product. That meant buying new equipment for the studio, as well as hiring voice-actors and musicians. Sullivan refused, arguing that part of Felix's charm was that he never spoke. Why mess with a formula that had made Felix indisputably the most popular cartoon star in the world?

Sullivan didn't plan on rocking the boat when things were going so smoothly. Raoul Barré retired from the business, returning to his native Canada to teach art in Montreal. It was a loss, but Messmer had developed a capable team of younger talent. Mexican born Rudy Zamora, with a year of training at Cooper Union, joined George Cannata and Al Eugster as a blackener. The trio would roughhouse in the break room. At the drawing boards they were all business. Despite an improving artistic quality in Felix films, no one wanted silent cartoons. Fox pulled out of distribution and Sullivan ended up dealing

with First National Pictures, a Warner Brothers subsidiary that made low-budget movies. It was a drop in stature. Some of that year's Felix releases were reissues, while a few interesting new films got made.

Felix the Cat
Pat Sullivan's universally popular cat where you have always wanted to see him--on the Educational Pictures program.
26
Short-Reel Animated Cartoons
Educational Pictures
THE SPICE OF THE PROGRAM
PAT-SULLIVAN.

These later Felix cartoons are the most surreal. Messmer's draftsmanship and sense of composition had improved so his characters filled the screen. Bold use of shadows added stark atmosphere. Only sixteen were made in 1928. The public, unaware of what went on behind the scenes, still adored that little black cat. When the Radio Corporation of America did a test broadcast of an experimental medium called television that year they used an image of Felix.

Production of Felix cartoons dropped to a dozen in 1929, but they had some sound, and fifteen old cartoons were reissued with shoddy soundtracks. First National no longer distributed them. Jacques Kopfstein, former production manager at Bray Studios, released Felix films through his Copley Pictures Corporation. People didn't like these new ones.

Lay-offs occurred at Sullivan's studio. With little else to do Al Eugster, Rudy Zamora and George Cannata all worked on a special project in 1929. The New York animation community had decided to host a dinner honoring Winsor McCay. Personnel from several studios pitched in as volunteers to make a pornographic cartoon titled EVEREADY HARTON IN BURIED TREASURE to be shown at the event. Film labs in America wouldn't develop it, so the porn cartoon was processed in Cuba.

Clearly, Prohibition didn't work, because the animators got good and drunk at Winsor McCay's dinner. When McCay was asked to speak, he took full credit for giving them all an art form, and berated the other animators for reducing it to nothing more than a mere trade. McCay wasn't wrong, but he was being unfair to a lot of the men present. Many of them sincerely wanted to take their work to the level of art, and wished they had McCay's financial resources to do as they pleased. McCay had put out a film every few years, at his own pace, for a brief period. He hadn't released one in nearly eight years before his speech. These guys were down in the trenches sweating out a cartoon per month for corporate bosses who wanted fast, not fancy. They did it because they loved doing it, and they wanted to make better cartoons. Better than circumstances permitted.

Pat Sullivan's delay in converting to sound backfired and by 1930 his studio was broke. There was still some money coming in from merchandising, but Mickey Mouse toys outsold Felix the Cat. Pat Sullivan bragged to reporters about moving his studio to Hollywood. Jacques Kopfstein announced he'd be releasing a series of twelve HYPO THE MONK cartoons from Sullivan, but nothing came of all that. Blue Note Records later operated from the building where Pat Sullivan Productions had been.

New York City's annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1932 featured a hot-air balloon of Felix. Two years later Sullivan attempted to start things up again to make sound cartoons. Those plans were interrupted when Sullivan's wife Marjorie fell to her death from a hotel window in Manhattan. Pat Sullivan died of heart failure shortly afterwards. Both Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and RKO Pictures contacted Otto Messmer about continuing the Felix series with them, but he didn't own the character. Despite prior promises from Sullivan, Otto Messmer got shafted when all rights to Felix went to Pat Sullivan's nephew in Australia. Sullivan's lawyer discussed a possible production arrangement with Pat Powers, but that fell through.

The year after Pat Sullivan's death director Komatsuzawa Hajime made a cartoon predicting the United States would soon invade his home country of Japan. The evil America was symbolized by an aggressive Mickey Mouse. As testament to the cross-cultural love for Felix, Hajime used that little black cat to represent one of the heroic Japanese people.

Felix, with the expected nine lives, would return in various incarnations over the coming decades. Messmer occupied himself doing the Felix comic strip and working for Douglas Leigh Incorporated in the St. Moritz Hotel at 50 Central Park South. Doug Leigh produced many of the iconic Times Square signs, including the ones using sequenced lights as animation.

By 1940 Doug Leigh's shop was at 630 Fifth Avenue. In 1941they made animated segments for NBC's New York weather broadcast. The segments featured the lamb mascot of Worsted Mills, who sponsored the broadcasts. Also in 1941, Leigh and Messmer made the first television commercial in the U.S. for the Bulova Watch Company.

FELIX
the CAT
-O.M-
YOU PICKED A POOR SHACK TO WALK INTO — I AIN'T SEEN ANY EATS IN A WEEK
I'LL MASCOT HIM INTO A MEAL, POOR FELLOW
IT WORKED
BY JOVE! I DO BELIEVE THAT CAT WILL BRING ME LUCK

During World War Two air raid blackouts hurt Doug Leigh's business. Messmer took a job with Famous Studios until war's end, then returned to Leigh. During the 1960s Messmer ran his own little studio a few doors over on the third floor of 530 Fifth Avenue. Many feel that he was the true creator of Felix, cheated of his property by the pernicious Pat Sullivan. Messmer simply recognized that Sullivan had been a troubled individual, and left it at that.